

The Event

By Johanna Read



Paddle Party

Join the people of French Polynesia in cheering at the *Hawaiki Nui Va'a*, the Super Bowl of outrigger canoe racing

At the blast of an air horn, the shallow lagoon goes from serene, shimmering azure to churning white water. Paddlers in dozens of outrigger canoes quickly reach a pace of 55 to 60 strokes per minute, speeding toward a channel that will take them through the reef and out to the open ocean. They'll keep this pace for about four hours a day over the next three days, as they race between French Polynesia's dazzling Leeward Islands.

This is the *va'a ono*, the pinnacle event of the *Hawaiki Nui Va'a*, the 30th edition of which takes place this November 1–4. Teams of six (*ono*) paddle rudderless outrigger canoes (*va'a*) for 79 miles in what many consider

to be the world's most difficult—and most beautiful—race of its kind. The trial begins in the calm lagoon of Huahine, proceeding quickly to an open-ocean crossing to Ra'iātea; day two is a 16-mile, barrier reef–shielded sprint to Taha'a; and the marathon ends with a grueling, 36-mile crossing to Bora Bora.

While this version of the contest has only been around for three decades, the ancestors of modern Polynesians, the Mā'ohi, began navigating the South Pacific in outrigger canoes more than 4,000 years ago. The *va'a* is such an important part of the culture here that the double-hulled version is depicted on French Polynesia's flag.

The name *Hawaiki Nui* also reflects Polynesia's heritage. *Hawaiki* (or *Havai'i*) refers to the birthplace of Polynesia, the location—thought to be the sacred island of Ra'iātea—from which explorers set out in their dugout canoes to explore the Pacific.

Nui means “big” in Tahitian, and the *Hawaiki Nui Va'a* doubles as the country's biggest party (or *bringué*), with athletes cheered on by thousands from the water and the beaches.

Clockwise from top: outrigger canoe racers at the *Hawaiki Nui Va'a*; celebratory leis; braving the waves in the South Pacific



“Everyone in Tahiti who can take holidays at race time goes to watch,” says Tom Schofield, captain of Windstar Cruises' *Wind Spirit*, a four-masted motor sailing yacht that plies these waters throughout the year. Visitors who want to catch the competition would be wise to book early—hotels and cruises fill up quickly—but there are many opportunities to see other *va'a* in action year-round. What's more,

those who want to attempt the sport themselves can take an introductory class with Moorea Ocean Riders or seek out one of the coaching clinics or week-long paddling camps offered by Tahiti Va'a Inc.



Courtesy of Tahiti Tourisme (all photos)